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The Questions of



Liberal Education



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THERE IS A CERTAIN KIND of liberal educator—I count myself as one—who bases his or her practice on a particular attitude toward the “Big Questions.” The questions of fundamental literacy in K–12 education, or of expertise in vocational and professional education, may be just as important, but we see them as quite different in kind. Indeed, the questions of liberal education take hold of people only under certain conditions. They call for distinct curricular and pedagogical approaches suited to a particular kind of learner. Beyond the scene of learning, these questions also challenge societies more generally to recognize the value of acknowledging, experiencing, and responding to them and to maintain forums for their discussion.

Now I admit that this understanding of liberal education can sound pompous and old hat. For the last few

decades, our societies have been challenging liberal educators in turn to explain why and how their practices remain pertinent to a swiftly changing, endlessly modernizing world. Many such educators have themselves joined the ranks of the doubting and contributed to sharpening and disseminating this criticism. Leaving aside the strains these changes have also put on K–12 and vocational and professional educations, could alteration in the social conditions of liberal education be presaging the latter’s extinction? In our age of ever more sophisticated versions of critical, ideology-unmasking theory and ever more sensitive scruples about diversity—not to mention competing, popular, and innovative media—the Big Questions can seem like inert, sacred cows. If we are to take them seriously today, we need at the very least to dispel their lofty vagueness and suspect majesty and to elucidate the specific nature of their appeal. What distinguishes these questions from others? To whom are they appropriately addressed? How could liberal educators help such people respond adequately?

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To take up these meta-questions, I propose to move away initially from the handy but rather uninformative metaphor of size. Who can really measure whether a question is large enough to count? Instead, I shall try to re-describe the nature of the questions of liberal education via a close reading of some words of Rainer Maria Rilke. It is my hope that a clearer appreciation of the existential nature of the questions will illuminate what should be distinctive about this education.

Living the questions

The passage comes from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. These letters are addressed to Franz Xaver Kappus, a nineteen-year-old would-be writer who had struck up a correspondence with the poet. Rilke was himself only twenty-seven and striving toward a breakthrough in his own work. He was also struggling with marital difficulties that perhaps increased his receptivity to the inner torment and ambivalence that Kappus must have expressed. This is how Rilke replies.

You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even knowing it, live your way into the answer. (1986, 34–35)

A stirring appeal, but one containing a number of riddles. What does it mean exactly to be “before all beginning”? How are we supposed to “love the questions themselves”? How could one *not* “live everything” and what is demanded by the exhortation to “live the questions now”? Could such a life truly lead to “the answer”? Finally, there is the issue of principal interest to us: namely, what questions is Rilke talking about and are they the same as those that should concern liberal educators? Let me start to speak to these interpretive issues by turning to Rilke's intriguing characterization of his addressee.

In his introduction to the collection of letters, Kappus avows that the focus should stay fully

on the Great Writer and leaves out his side of the correspondence as well as any of his life's details.¹ This reticence invites us to consider the condition of the person the passage is addressing in general terms. Rilke recognizes this condition as one prior to “all” commencement; he links it to a state in which one is struggling to resolve certain matters one cares deeply about that take the form of questions. The reason the questions are unresolved is because one still has not begun, not even started to exist. How could this make sense? I am reminded of the Cartesian principle, foundational for modern philosophy, that my existence is grounded on my awareness that I am thinking. Perhaps Rilke is suggesting that Kappus does not fully exist because the latter is not yet thinking for himself. Thoughts may be passing through his mind, but what remains in suspense is whether those thoughts are authentically his own. For Descartes, the experimental and methodical nature of the doubt that leads to the *cogito* never really includes uncertainty about *who* is doing the doubting, thinking, and existing. Rilke, in contrast, concerns himself with radical doubt in its wild state, where it surprises and consumes one without being willed or controlled. For his addressee—that is, anyone in the same condition as Kappus—the questions that have invaded him or her are not ones he or she has necessarily authored or thought. They disrupt active, creative thinking and render existence itself insecure.

No wonder Kappus is desperate. But Rilke counsels “patience.” Instead of affirming Kappus and guiding him on his quest to settle his heart, he advocates loving the state of irresolution itself. Why ought Kappus not to look for answers? Because he is in no position to accept them since he is unable to “live” them. How should he “love the questions” if not by devoting himself to answering them? He should regard them as “locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.” The call for patience is thus supported by two strands of converse argument. On the one hand, Rilke claims that an impatient search for answers would be unproductive because answers can only be given to one when one is ready to live them, and someone who has not yet begun to think his or her own thoughts is incapable of doing this. On the other hand, what is possible and good for someone so before all beginning is rather to revere the questions

that occur to him or her as such, accepting their hidden dimension indifferent to any seeker's interest.

Notice how the first, negative argument against the search for answers puts stress on a desire that these be supplied by another. This desire grows presumably out of a natural disposition to believe that what one lacks must be in the possession of someone else. In the realm of questions and answers, this particularly makes sense, since most children learn initially that adults hold the solution to whatever stumps them. The argument therefore turns on the claim that even if Kappus found someone who professed to have such answers and wanted to pass them on, they could not be taken in. Kappus can only receive what he is prepared to live. And he is not yet ready to think or be: those answers could only be lived by someone else.

The general educational significance of this point should be clear. If we imagine the passage addressing nineteen-year-old students today, we can read it as urging them not to look

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for teachers, inside or outside schools, to clear up the questions that most profoundly trouble them. Conversely, it is warning teachers that students who have not yet begun to think for themselves have no use for their solutions, their knowledge. Perhaps later, when these students' conditions have

changed and they have deliberately decided to enter vocational or professional education programs, they will know what to do with the expertise the teacher is communicating. Or maybe earlier, when the students are virtually unaware that they must begin to be distinct selves, they can absorb the standard forms of literacy in K–12 education as an extension of the family in which they are absorbed. When a student awakens to the challenge to exist as an individual, however, other people's answers will appear meaningless. Accordingly, Rilke offers none.

So is there nothing educators can do for such students? Rilke's positive argument is that we can help them alter the way they regard questions. In childhood, questions tend to be

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closely linked to demands that children and adults make on each other; later in adulthood, questions are often a formulation of social problems to be cooperatively solved. But when a person is struggling to think for oneself about what and how to love, the questions come to one from oneself. How shall one begin to respond constructively? According to Rilke, by devoting oneself to these questions not as means to an end but as ends in themselves.

What he is calling for may be viewed as loosely analogous to Kant's conception of the aesthetic attitude. To love a question for its beauty would be to marvel at what it presents to the imagination—how it may remind us, for instance, of an undisturbed room or a book of secrets, or more generally, of a vision of the world that we may not fully understand but that is accompanied by delight and an affirmative judgment—without taking an interest

in how the question's existence may make a difference to us, how it may help gratify some desire. Why do I feel so estranged from the world that claims me? Instead of trying to figure out how to make this pain go away, I could seek to appreciate the world of this question; I could speculate on how the things I

have experienced support and are supported by this sense of strangeness. Dedicating myself to a question in this way means transforming it from a demand or problem into a wonder. Furthermore, behind every question there is a chain of others; I could respond to one by drawing out its implications, and so its wonder, in related questions.

Why would anyone want to do this? To appreciate the beauty above is to see that this particular question is out of order: like the un-Cartesian doubts that may flood one unbidden, beauty moves us by surprise. A question's beauty is inherently delightful prior to the formation of any desire requiring satisfaction. And this priority returns us to the condition of being before all beginning as well as to the challenge of living this state. Here is Kappus, or our nineteen-year-old student, struggling to start to think, love, and exist, wrestling with questions that seemingly hold him back. He is

tempted to try on the answers of others, but that would simply trap him in an existence not his own. His only authentic way forward is to *live* the state of irresolution; we may interpret this act of living in an existentialist sense as one of thoughtfully, decisively, affirmatively choosing to be this unresolved person, the sort of being Sartre calls free. Is there anything anyone could do to encourage such a person to accept the anguish and isolation that is part of this freedom? Rilke draws attention to its beauty expressed by its questions. By wholeheartedly claiming these questions, he teaches Kappus, Kappus may begin to be himself.

And the answers? Oddly, Rilke concludes by beckoning toward the possibility of gradually and unconsciously living one's way into "the" answer. Notwithstanding his stern warning elsewhere in the correspondence against the use of irony, I detect a touch of that in these last words. If one truly gives oneself over to loving the questions themselves, then one's provisional responses will serve only to extend the questions into other realms, never to resolve them. In this sense, the questions have no answers. However, the singular and integrative answer that may occur to one sometime in the future, an answer to the whole chain of questions one has lived through, can always take the form of a history of what one has made of them. Such a narrative is likely to have its tragic side, though—hence the bite of irony—in that it would be the story of how confused desires eventually produced a work of beauty, if not, perhaps, actual satisfaction.

Liberal education

We are now in a position to come back to our central concerns. Does Rilke's passage shed any light on the kind of questions that should distinguish liberal education from other kinds of education? Does it suggest some specific approaches liberal educators could take to help the Kappuses in their classes? And does it leave us with any confidence that these questions and approaches are still pertinent today?

If we take the passage to articulate an idea of liberal education, then we may identify three features of the questions on which this education focuses. First, the questions are ones rooted in what the student seriously cares about, ones in which the student's own thinking and self-understanding are at stake. They cannot be ones to which the student is



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obligated to reply. They concern not the rewards of others but the student's very existence as a whole and distinct person. Second, these questions can only be answered, in the historical and ironic sense explained above, by the questioner. Students in the grip of them cannot be saved by savants, however much they may want to be. And finally, these questions nevertheless may be loved for their beauty, be appreciated for the way they evoke wonder at the world they illuminate. They thus turn our attention away from the blurry objects of our contradictory desires toward what is given prior to desire. By patiently devoting ourselves to the beauty of the unresolved heart, we may begin to claim our existence and live in response to its gift.

The questions of liberal education, in short, are the student's own questions; more precisely, they are those of the student who is struggling to be himself or herself. How, then, could a liberal educator aid such students? Would that not be a better task for a therapist? Not necessarily. Without delving into students' personal experiences (and entering into a shaky transference relationship), a teacher could encourage them to cast their questions in a language significantly different from the one they already possess. Such a language may be learned from texts that stand at some distance from their world. By coaching students in the close reading of such works, the teacher may enable them to master new forms for representing recognizable experiences, ones that illuminate and emphasize unfamiliar features. If the teacher can also create opportunities and incentives for them to practice freely and thoughtfully criticizing these forms, students may grow used to employing them to acknowledge and articulate questions that are otherwise hard to talk about directly. The liberal educator would thus be helping students to translate their existential questions into another world of related experiences.

To what purpose? Rilke's two arguments clarify the rationale. First, this practice of translation would replace and block that of providing authoritative answers. Liberal education would distinguish itself from other kinds of education, on the one hand, by its scrupulous acknowledgment of ignorance, one enforced by the divergent and opposing viewpoints it entertains in order to nourish renewed questioning. And second, this practice would amount to a broadening of the students'

questions that promises to deepen the students' wonder. Echoing our original, given metaphor, which may have its uses after all, the liberal educator can invite students to love the beauty of their questions by enlarging the reach of these questions. This would be the positive aim that distinguishes his or her approach from that of other educators.

Evidently, we would need to develop some much more specific examples of this educational approach, ones tailored to concrete circumstances, and to test these in rigorous experiments before we could place much confidence in this vision of liberal education. I have been merely spinning an initial theory out of an interpretation of Rilke's passage. Obviously, too, I owe alternative interpretations and possible objections a more substantial hearing and response. I merely wanted to begin to plumb the theory's suggestiveness. Before I end for now, though, I should say a few words in explanation of why I find this vision pertinent to our contemporary world.

As I observed at the start, one main thing driving the suspicion that liberal education is a dinosaur is the ever more frantic pace at which all that is solid is melting into air. Whatever postmodernity is supposed to be, it has not displaced disorientation as a central feature of our experience. A surmise that should retain interest for us, then, is that this disorientation may be tightly linked to our free nature, perhaps as an experiential effect of that freedom, perhaps as something that causes us to experience freedom as predominantly freedom from determination. Such an existentialist understanding of freedom thus continues to pose a vital question for how we make sense of our (post-)modernity with its many conflicts, such as that between secularization and fundamentalism. An education that addresses this charged sense of freedom would be an important liberal education for us today. □

REFERENCE

Rilke, Rainer Maria. 1986. *Letters to a young poet*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Vintage.

NOTE

- 1 Kappus's introduction may be found in the earlier English edition of the letters: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a young poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1954), 11–13.